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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 000112

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/29/2019

TAGS: PTER PREL SCUL AE

SUBJECT: ENGAGING ISLAM IN A NEW U.S. ADMINISTRATION -- NOTED CLERIC
IN UAE EXPRESSES OPTIMISM

REF: A) 08 ABU DHABI 1112, B) 08 ABU DHABI 1111

Classified by Ambassador Richard Olson, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Moderate Islam -- carefully monitored by authorities -- is the accepted norm in the UAE. Clerics comfortable with the establishment's approach set the tone of Islamic discourse. In a private luncheon with one such active voice, Pol Chief was pressed to encourage a balanced USG approach to Islam, reminded of high hopes the Muslim world has for the new U.S. President, and asked for advice on channeling interfaith dialogue most effectively. The goal of sharing a tolerant view of Islam clearly reflects the UAEG's preferred Islamic tone; whether this "establishment" ideal reflects the views of a majority of hearts and minds in the UAE is less clear in the absence of rigorous popular dialogue. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Noted Islamic scholar Habib al-Jifri (full name Habib Ali Zain Al Abideen Al Jifri) requested a January 26 lunch to continue a dialogue started previously on interfaith and intercultural understanding. Founder of the Tabah Foundation (dedicated to enhancing modern Islamic discourse with UAEG funding support) and a frequent presence on television, in mosques, in inter-faith dialogues, and in senior circles of the Abu Dhabi establishment, al-Jifri wanted to review some of his frustrations about the depth of engagement between Islam and the West and solicit advice on focusing inter-faith dialogue. In a relaxed exchange -- more a personal dialogue than formal diplomatic conversation -- he revealed part of his own story and appealed for renewed efforts at mutual understanding.

Defining personal jihad

¶3. (C) Al-Jifri spoke of a convincing speech by a young Osama bin Laden in Hadramawt, Yemen, when he (al-Jifri) was an impressionable 16-year-old dedicated to a pious Islamic creed. He said he emerged from that session ready to commit to the jihad in Afghanistan. He told his mother he would be leaving for jihad; she suggested he visit his own spiritual advisor, who wisely advised him that the jihad of the sword was not his ultimate calling but that mastering his heart and morals were a more worthy cause. That moment changed his life, he emphasized, elaborating on the need for tolerance and mutual understanding; love of God and man are what should capture our imaginations, not division and violence. (He also clearly contrasted the appearance of a convincing young Osama with the current "evil-looking" face of the same man.)

Inter-connecting communities and civilizations

¶4. (C) Having chosen the route of peace and moderation, al-Jifri said he has sought understanding across many cultures while losing the support of the more rigid Islamic authorities (he said two fatwas against him inhibit his visiting Mecca). He described his personal investment in interfaith dialogue, including what he said were very productive sessions at Yale and Cambridge last year, in addition to dialogue with the Vatican (he was one of 38 Islamic scholars who penned an open letter to the Pope in 2006). Through these activities he has tried to see the world as others perceive it -- discovering agreement on underlying principles of human faith in spite of doctrinal differences. Committed to continue this effort, he said he will be participating in strategy sessions among his peers in coming days to further refine methods and goals of future dialogue.

¶ 15. (C) Expressing high hopes for President Obama, whose emphasis on "American values and principles" is just what the world hopes to see from America, al-Jifri said that as a global power the U.S. should step back from the destruction of recent years and restore faith in its moderate role. The world needs the contribution that America can make. Asked what particular advice he would offer the new President, he said the President's oft-repeated values and principles should be his guide. He should look at "1.5 million people suffering in Gaza" at face value, for example, not merely as a population caught up in "Israel's right to defend itself." Former President Bush's statement to that effect had drowned out the moderates, he cautioned, inhibiting moderate Islam from curbing the power of Hamas. Pressed nonetheless to acknowledge an ongoing Arab/Muslim role in squelching the power of Hamas, he reiterated that his (and his peers') ability to do so was impeded by "American sound bites" justifying the war -- creating an outcry in Arab streets that no one could combat. Speaking out against Hamas would in fact have been counterproductive in the heat of emotions swirling around Gaza, he asserted.

¶ 16. (SBU) He also advised the new U.S. President to let reality define his perceptions, not rely on the impressions of others. A leader must take great care to ensure that advice proffered on topics related to the Middle East and Islam are not tainted by anyone's political agenda. See Gaza as the human catastrophe that it is, he suggested.

¶ 17. (C) Lamenting the plight of the Palestinians, and with clear emotion (his eyes welled up with tears) as he spoke of the suffering, al-Jifri noted the damage done to American interests by the Gaza conflict. He recounted an anecdote at the Sana'a Airport in which he had offered a candy bar to an Egyptian child. The child's father had said he did not want his child eating the sweet if it was from America, so al-Jifri asked permission to offer it to the child directly. The child's reply was even more surprising: "That is the flesh of the children of Gaza."

Commonality between religions;
and tolerance for differences

¶ 18. (C) In a discussion of religion's role in society, al-Jifri stated his desire to understand Christian views more deeply as he pursues greater peace and tolerance. He took the discussion of Christ a step beyond the oft-mentioned precept that Muslims consider Christ a noted prophet, and shared his own deep feelings about Christ's influence in guiding humankind. He did not feel that doctrinal differences need inhibit human cooperation.

¶ 19. (C) Al-Jifri noted that Islam is no more monolithic than Christianity, making the "dialogue within religions" as much a challenge as the "dialogue between" them. He argued for a flexible interpretation of some aspects of worship -- offering the anecdote of multiple acceptable postures in Muslim prayer as an example. Small variations should not inhibit a common understanding of the underlying spiritual goal. We must avoid stereotypes and set aside skepticism of those who may be a little different than us.

¶ 10. (C) A leader in any capacity -- religious, political, or societal -- must use caution in what they say, he added. Avoiding saying the "wrong" thing is also critical, as unintentional consequences often result from careless words. Once errant words have poisoned perceptions, leaders lose their ability to reign in negative reactions.

Movies as a medium -- but costly

¶ 11. (SBU) Pol Chief noted the merits to cross-cultural understanding of a film recently screened in Abu Dhabi (sponsored by Abu Dhabi authorities with much fanfare) on the topic of Ibn Battuta's 14th century pilgrimage to Mecca. Articulately presented for an English-speaking audience, the film offered a heavy dose of Islamic faith against the backdrop of a human drama to which many can easily relate. Al-Jifri said similar films were under consideration. He described one on the topic of Islamic views of forgiveness --

designed to display the fears of some residents of Mecca (that they would be dealt with severely) on the eve of the Prophet Mohammed's re-entry into the city and contrasting those fears with the actual approach the Prophet took (mercy to the vanquished). A well produced film could leave viewers with a potentially favorable (or at least balanced) view of one key aspect of Islam, felt al-Jifri.

¶12. (C) Al-Jifri said although such films could tell a powerful story to non-Muslim audiences, financing was a problem. Corporate sponsors, for example, don't want to be affiliated with religion and therefore shy away from these projects. Without financing, the cost of producing a quality film is prohibitive, he lamented. (Pol Chief also noted that sources of funding often "label" films as propaganda, so careful financing is key.)

Comment: Commitment to the approved faith

¶13. (C) Comment: While it is natural to have one's personal religious framework foremost in mind when discussing international understanding -- and al-Jifri is clearly a strict and committed traditional Muslim cleric who very much looks the part -- it is also vital that all parties keep sight of the common ideals of humanity. Al-Jifri represents a dedicated Islamic force, with full commitment to his cause, while exhibiting genuine interest in a deeper appreciation for alternative perspectives. This approach reflects the UAEG's brand of moderation, exhibited in the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince's Ramadan lectures (reftels), highlighted in the diverse nature of the UAE's cosmopolitan population, and even carved into a new series of sculptures outside the Crown Prince's Diwan which spells out the word "tolerance" in English.

¶14. (C) Comment continued: At the same time, al-Jifri's UAEG-endorsed approach to his faith is not necessarily approved by all. In a society acclimated to conformity and order (guided from the top down), anecdotal reports suggest that official scripting of weekly sermons may push some away from "approved Islam" and leave them inclined to explore their religion on their own terms. By preventing space for religious (or political) dialogue and limiting the intellectual rigor and critical analysis that strengthens understanding of one's own creed, authorities may in some measure impede the very ideals they seek to achieve. It is also troubling that moderate Islamic voices do not (in this case claim they cannot) do more to combat Islamic extremism in places like Gaza. American sound bites aside, we need moderate Islam to help shoulder the responsibility of spreading moderation. End comment.

OLSON